

The legacy of Streamlining and Un-sustainability in Industrial Design

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Dale", is written over a horizontal line.

Acknowledgment

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Abstract

This is an historical account of the birth of the industrial design profession that seeks an understanding of what industrial design is and does. This understanding is necessary given that industrial design is being called upon to contribute to sustainability. So far, attempts to orient industrial design toward sustainability have been limited because of a failure to acknowledge its agency in the current crisis of over consumption and because of a limited understanding of industrial design thinking.

Tony Fry's 'defuturing' - a means of finding the historical bases of unsustainability - is used as a starting point to help understand how industrial design is implicated in the environmental crisis of the present. Primary design and secondary design history texts are used to investigate the early industrial designers' aims and methods. More recent theories from the fields of design thinking and sociology are also used in discussion to help understand why design failed to grasp its future.

It is asserted, following Fry, that industrial design is implicated in unsustainability because it sought to stimulate consumption by creating desirable and stylish products. It appears, however, that accelerated consumption was considered by the designers as a means to an end. Industrial design arrived as a new profession in the midst of the Depression in America and announced itself as the means to solve the ills of the world. Its ambition was to design a technocratic Utopia, which it could achieve by providing creative leadership and practical methods. To realise this vision and to speed its arrival, design stimulated demand for the products of industry.

Industrial designers quickly became men of influence and their products were in huge demand. They ascribed to Modernism, and developed comprehensive methods that were believed capable of yielding functional perfection. Because the methods were so successful in generating practical and desirable products, they were logically extended to the task of environmental reconstruction. It was the faith in the creative genius of leading industrial designers, coupled with a functionalist epistemology that concealed the indeterminacy of design methods and design's relational consequences.

Now, in the face of over-consumption, industrial design needs to know its history and its agency. What it has done to date is attempt to counter unsustainability by making its products less environmentally impacting. It has done this by applying the same design methods that were developed to counter 'under-consumption'. So it sustains that which is inherently unsustainable, contributing always to product-based well-being. It has forgotten its agency in bringing about this conception of well-being and ignores design's creative potential to not only conceive of new solutions, but to steer the sustainability or not of behaviours and attitudes.

Preface

I am completely seduced by industrial design: its thinking, its products and its agency. I encountered industrial design first through its history, in Fine Arts lectures at Sydney University. What grabbed me was the beauty of industrial design forms and the change agency this profession seemed to offer. I enrolled in an industrial design undergraduate degree and I'm now an educator in the field. As I was inducted into the profession, I became disillusioned by its complacency and conservatism. Industrial design seemed to me to be very technically oriented, and stuck in a service relationship to marketing to deliver the ever-new which was also the ever-dull. Where was the radicalism that is its history? My work in teaching and research has been devoted to addressing the massive void between industrial design as is, and the radical change that is demanded, particularly by sustainability imperatives. This thesis is a step toward bridging the void for me (and other students of industrial design): to see how what I know and teach about industrial design can be capitalised on for sustainability.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	1
Significance to design and sustainability	1
Methods/ Terms/ Understandings	5
Ontological Design.....	6
Overview of the argument.....	6
 II. PART ONE: How industrial design became a powerful driver of unsustainability.....	 8
1. <i>The birth of industrial design</i>	8
2. <i>Defuturing and industrial design</i>	8
3. <i>Styling success in the automobile industry</i>	9
4. <i>The moral and cultural mandate for Streamlining</i>	11
Design history sees the Streamline style as top-down.....	11
Demand-side Style	12
Formal training to discern good form: Body Mechanics and Art Appreciation	13
Social Efficiency	14
Good Form from 'inside-out'	14
Home economics as a reflection of social efficiency	15
Home economics becomes home making	15
5. <i>Industrial design as a Depression-recovery strategy</i>	17
Consumer Engineering	18
Links between Consumer Engineering and Industrial Design	19
Product consumption for progress.....	21
6. <i>The rise of industrial design as a business tool</i>	23
The artist enters the factory: from styling to design for manufacture	23
7. <i>Industrial design methods: certain and scientific</i>	26
Why the methods were articulated rapidly and reproduced frequently	27
The process and methods	28
Design communications	29
Finality of design resolution.....	30
8. <i>How industrial designers began to claim their visionary status</i>	31
9. <i>Design in industry as a triumph of Modernism</i>	33
10. <i>Conclusion</i>	37

III. PART TWO: Locating the defuturing in industrial design.....	38
1. <i>Introduction.....</i>	38
2. <i>Positivist or constructivist methods?.....</i>	38
A user-centred refrigerator design process.....	40
Sales Appeal.....	41
Creativity as 'sheer talent' and creative genius.....	42
Sign function.....	43
Design changes 'habits of mind'.....	45
3. <i>The myth of functional perfection.....</i>	46
Double misconception of design.....	48
4. <i>The New York World Fair 1939: redesigning the world from above.....</i>	48
Introduction.....	48
A change in plan: from commemorative to future-oriented.....	49
The futuring potential of the Fair.....	50
Mumford's vision for the Fair of the Future.....	52
Industrial design's vision for the Fair.....	52
The Fair as Future.....	53
Visionary to myopic.....	55
Positivism hid the relational consequences of total design.....	55
'Scopic empowerment' as an extension of functionalism.....	56
5. <i>The defuturing in industrial design.....</i>	57
IV. PART THREE: Industrial design and sustainability.....	58
1. <i>Industrial design's agency in the defutured.....</i>	58
How its history has implicated industrial design in the current crisis of unsustainability.....	58
How the defuturing account has rendered the condition of unsustainability open to design intervention.....	58
The legacy of Streamlining in current design practice.....	59
2. <i>New models for Design.....</i>	59
Manzini.....	60
New roles and relationships.....	61
V. References.....	63